


# The Builder.

No. CCCCXXXI.

SATURDAY, MAY 10, 1851.

 R. WEALE, in the volume entitled "London Exhibited in 1851," which he has just now published, has brought together a very large amount of information, amply illustrated by wood engravings. It contains 910 pages of letter-press, and is a marvel of cheapness. London, "enlarged and still increasing London," being the theatre of an event of high moral influence, the editor thought it "desirable that the stranger in our giant city should be made acquainted with its organisation and structure—with its trade and commerce—with the sources of its social and political greatness—with its many treasures hidden from the eye of the superficial observer. The aim of the present volume is to endeavour to effect this object—and in such a manner as not only to satisfy the mind of the learned and scientific inquirer, but to afford to the man of business and the sight-seer the advantages of a book of reference to those numerous depositories of art and science which abound in the metropolis, and which render such effectual aid towards the refinement of domestic life, by furnishing alike the means of instruction and amusement."

It consists first of general observations necessary to explain the natural situation and structure of our metropolitan city, with essays on those regulations which are connected with our political organisation and constitution, habits, and working of the social system; after which distinct subjects are treated of, and a descriptive account given of the noble accumulations of works of art which London contains. This list is very large, and will surprise many who have lived here all their lives. Under the head of Statistics, some very interesting information is given. The architecture of London is treated of at very considerable length; and so, too, are "gardens," "observatories," and public institutions.

Being able to say so much of this book, we regret that the tone of it is such as would prevent most Englishmen from recommending it to foreign visitors. There is no occasion to point out to these our barbarism, weakness, and decline: they need no prompting to detect these matters, and are much more disposed to underrate than overrate anything they find in England. We have an indistinct recollection of an old saw against crying "stinking fish," and of another against the bird that "fouls its own nest." But the writer or writers of "London Exhibited in 1851" have a different notion, and abuse everything right and left: apparently they have no other object than to prove English art utterly debased and irretrievably lost. Admit this as a fact, which we do not, and even then a guide-book for strangers and

foreigners by an Englishman is not the place where we should look for the exposition of it. Much of what we object to is very true, and very cleverly stated, but is wholly out of place. With the writer of the work before us, all modern works are mean subterfuges, makeshifts, and make-believes: we are in the "depth of inventive pauperism."

In the Temple church the design of the organ "and the other woodwork is a forgery," the new Coal-Exchange will be considered "by foreigners of real taste and observation," the "most melancholy instance yet displayed of the state to which a once noble art may, by centuries of abuse, neglect, and false principles, be at length reduced;" and the new Houses of Parliament are treated little better. According to our author, we are precluded from—"all hope of our works again being graced with marks of genuine wide-spread refinement and real splendour, such as pervade and distinguish all those preserved from that brilliant age of our history comprised in the reigns of the three Edward Plantagenets. We may admire and counterfeit, but cannot imitate the marks of a civilisation so far above ours. As the direction of the wind is known by a feather, so are the tendencies of a society to civilisation or de-civilisation written, if we could but read them, in the most trifling works of luxury, even the ornaments of a tomb."

And then of the modern works at Westminster Abbey, he writes,—

"Of the south transept windows and their sham antiques, we would gladly say nothing; but there is in this last refuge of our arts,—this attempt to reproduce an effect without its cause, by simply exaggerating the defects of our fathers' works, by throwing away all advantages that they had not, instead of acquiring what they had,—thus wilfully combining all their works' unavoidable defects and all our own, with the merits of neither;—there is something in this so diametrically pitiful, that even the open surrender of mind to matter, as in the monstrosities of modern engineering, seems less humiliating. One would think it should be disgrace enough to record in monuments what we must performe show, viz. how much we have lost; without going out of our way to make it appear (falsely), that we have in six centuries gained nothing—no better materials from all our chemistry—no larger pieces from all our manufacturing pretension—no less clumsy construction from all our boasted mechanics—no finer workmanship from all our refinement—no more graceful design from all the opened stores of Greece and Italy—no richer variety from all our laboured collection of the brain-work of every age and clime; In a word, that six centuries have passed away to leave us not only minus the principal thing, but plus nothing."

Of the churches rebuilt since Wren's time, the writer says,—

"Out of thirty-eight old structures (all except four, anterior to the Reformation), some displaying the genuine splendour of the monastic architecture, and nearly all containing that abundance of refined thought by which the mediæval builders endeavoured to glorify God with the best of all He had given them; out of all these, only six have been replaced by buildings with any claim whatever to be considered works of thought. Shame would now gladly draw a veil over the rest of these disgraceful productions. It has been well asked, who could ever have anticipated in any previous stage of church architecture, and especially of its ancient glory in this country, that in the nineteenth century, an English church would come to mean four screens of plastered brick covered by about an eighth of an acre of plastered laths? To such a pitch did the constant pursuit of an object the direct reverse of art (viz.—economy of thought), at length reach. It is not the economy of handiwork in these

buildings that offends us, for some of the Norman churches have nearly as little; and the ever-esteemed St. Sophia quite as little in proportion to its size. Still less is it their economy of material (a quality distinguishing the works of nature, and therefore a beauty in temples to the Author of nature). No: with all their parsimony, these frail tottering erections have no economy of matter; for, as a late architect calculated, about a fourth of what they contain is always useless burthen, and another fourth employed in supporting that burthen;—and the same author truly observed, 'What a shame is it to man, to pile up, in a rude coarse crazy and unhandsome manner, the good materials with which Providence has blessed him, to mar them by folly and ignorance [wisful ignorance in order to save thought] and to call such an assemblage of malformation a temple!' To object to these buildings for their fancied plainness is a double error: first, because plainness has no necessary connection with ugliness or profanity in building (as the Norman and Byzantine examples above-mentioned prove); and, secondly, because these odious works are the reverse of plain. Plain?—why everything visible in them is ornament. What is the ceiling?—what are its hanging mouldings and lumps of plaster?—what are the walls and all other surfaces?—what are the sham stone, the sham marbles, the sham oak?—what is every feature and appearance in the exterior?—the mode of arranging the bricks\* to hide the real structure, the mode of counterfeiting in the windows the appearance of holes, the mode of disguising how the wall above them is supported, the mode of hiding the roof or its commencement, by keeping it behind the wall; and yet adding a sham cornice to counterfeit the effect of its projecting over? If all these things be not ornaments, what is their use? We assert that these hideous preaching-boxes are more ornamented than Henry VII.'s chapel, for their real structure is entirely hidden by ornament, within and without."

And then as to the churches of to-day in the revived style of the middle ages, he is equally complimentary, slashes about right and left, and condemns the whole without exception or reservation. Instead of pointing out to foreigners, as he might and ought to have done, the great ability which some of our architects have shown in modern churches, and specimens of the excellent workmanship they contain, the whole are classed together as miserable shams and disgusting puerilities.

St. Pancras Church; St. Luke's, Chelsea; the British Museum; the new buildings at the Tower of London,—all, of course, come in for abuse; in fact, it is difficult to find anything that escapes it. "London Exhibited" is but half its title; it should have been "London Exhibited in Bad Colours, and London Architects gibbeted."

We share, it is true, in the writer's indignation when he speaks of the interior of Westminster Abbey:—

"The sepulchral memorials that nearly fill the lower parts of this edifice are a subject we would fain leave untouched. The wide world presents probably no other such contrast as that between this matchless temple and the contents that profane it. History hardly suffices to establish so incredible a fact, as that one and the same people could descend in five centuries from that height of refinement to this unparalleled depth of vulgarity. In this spot are brought together, in their utmost intensity, the most opposite combinations of mental qualities—the noblest and the basest, the most lovely and the most odious that mute matter could by any torture be made to embody. Most humiliating is the thought that each of these things was once expected to please, was actually thought: beautiful, when the very first step taken was the ugly brutal selfishness of backing away the hard-thought, hard-wrought

\* Technically the "Flamish bond facing."

\* "London Exhibited in 1851," considering its natural and physical characteristics; its antiquity and architecture; its art, manufactures, trade, and organisation; its social, literary, and scientific institutions; and its numerous galleries of fine art. With 205 illustrations, executed by Mr. Robert Burman, Mr. O. Jovis, Mr. J. B. Jobbins, and others, including a newly-constructed map, engraved by Mr. William Lewis. Edited and published by John Weale, London.